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Neo-Creo

By WILLIAM SAFIRE

The word *creationism*, coined in 1868 in opposition to what was then called *Darwinism* or *evolutionism*, had fallen on hard times. The proponents of a theory faithfully attributing the origin of matter to God, "the creator," were seemingly overwhelmed by the theory put forward by Charles Darwin and bolstered with much evidence by 20th century scientists. As a result, the noun *creationism* (like its predecessor, teleology, the study of purposeful design in nature) gained a musty connotation while *evolutionism* modishly lost its *-ism*.

Then along came the phrase *intelligent design*, and evolution had fresh linguistic competition. Though the phrase can be found in an 1847 issue of *Scientific American* and in an 1868 book, it was probably coined in its present sense in "Humanism," a 1903 book by Ferdinand Canning Scott Schiller: "It will not be possible to rule out the supposition that the process of evolution may be guided by an *intelligent design*."

The phrase lay relatively dormant for nearly a century. "The term *intelligent design* came up in 1988 at a conference in Tacoma, Wash., called Sources of Information Content in DNA," recalls Stephen Meyer, director of the Center for Science and Culture at the Discovery Institute in Seattle, who was present at the phrase's re-creation. "Charles Thaxton referred to a theory that the presence of DNA in a living cell is evidence of a designing intelligence. We weren't political; we were thinking about molecular biology and information theory. This wasn't stealth *creationism*. The phrase became the banner that we rallied around throughout the early 90's. We wanted to separate ourselves from the strict Darwinists and the creationists."

At about that time, the traditional creationists took up the phrase. "We are a Christian organization and use the term to refer to the Christian God," says John Morris, president of the Institute for Creation Research in Santee, Calif. "The modern *intelligent design* movement looks at Dr. Phillip E. Johnson as its founder. . . . His book, 'Darwin on Trial,' kind of started it all in the early 90's. We were using *intelligent design* as an intuitive term: a watch implies a watchmaker." (That mechanical analogy was first used by the philosopher William Paley in his 1802 book, "Natural Theology," a pre-Darwinian work holding that the complexity of nature implies an intelligent creator -- namely, God.)

The marketing genius within the phrase -- and the reason it now drives many scientists and educators up the walls of academe -- is in its use of the adjective *intelligent*, which intrinsically refutes the longstanding accusation of anti-intellectualism. Although the intelligent agent referred to is Divine with a capital D, the word's meaning also rubs off on the proponent or believer. That's why *intelligent design* appeals to not only the DNA-driven Discovery Institute complexity theorists but also the traditional God's-handiwork faithful.

This banner floating over two disparate armies challenging evolutionary theory has the Darwinist scientific establishment going ape. Prof. Leonard Krishtalka of the University of Kansas lumped the armies together last month in a widely quoted definition of the I.D. movement as "nothing more than *creationism* in a cheap tuxedo." Reached by my researcher, Aaron Britt, Professor Krishtalka added: "It's a sophisticated camouflage of Genesis-driven *creationism*. *Intelligent design* sounds scientific, and they couch it as science instead of religion. It's frighteningly Orwellian." Alan Leshner, C.E.O. of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, says: "Whether or not there is or was an *intelligent designer* is not a scientific question. It's not an alternative to evolution. What they are trying to do is get religion in the science classroom."

Media scorn piles on: the liberal pundit Jonathan Alter of *Newsweek* finds "the threat to science and reason comes less from fundamentalists who believe the earth was created in six days than from sophisticated branding experts and polemical Ph.D.'s," while the conservative columnist-psychiatrist Charles Krauthammer in *Time* denounces "this tarted-up version of *creationism*." The cartoonist Signe Wilkenson of *The Philadelphia Daily News* has President Bush pointing to a convoluted map labeled "Iraq Strategy" with a general in a pupil's chair asking, "So when can we study *intelligent design*?"

To counter the "sophisticated branding experts" who flummoxed establishmentarian evolutionaries with *intelligent design*, opponents of classroom debate over Darwin's theory have come up with a catchily derisive neologism that lumps the modern I.D. advocates with religious fundamentalists: *neo-creo*. The rhyming label was coined on Aug. 17, 1999, by Philip Kitcher, professor of the philosophy of science at Columbia University, in a lively and lengthy online debate in *Slate* magazine with the abovementioned Phillip Johnson, professor of law at the University of California, Berkeley: "Enter the *neo-creos*," Kitcher wrote. "Scavenging the scientific literature, they take claims out of context and pretend that everything about evolution is controversial. . . . But it's all a big con." Johnson replied: "I want to replace the culture war over evolution with a healthy, vigorous intellectual debate. The biggest obstacle is that the evolutionary scientists are genuinely baffled as to why everyone does not believe as they do. That is why they appear so dogmatic, and why they tend to slip into sarcasm and browbeating."

I.D. advocates like to point to Albert Einstein, an apostle of order in the universe, who repeatedly rejected a statistical conception of physics with his famous aphorism, "I cannot believe that God plays dice with the world." However, his recent biographer, Dennis Overbye, a science reporter for *The Times*, says: "Einstein believed there was order in the universe but that it had not been designed for us." Overbye also notes that Einstein wrote the evenhanded "Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind."

I will leave the last word on this old controversy with its new phraseology to the neuroscientist Leon Cooper, a Nobel laureate at Brown University. He tells all of today's red-faced disputants: "If we could all lighten up a bit perhaps, we could have some fun in the classroom discussing the evidence and the proposed explanations -- just as we do at scientific conferences."

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